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those inclined to favor the object, without deduction for the commission of agents, the sum now due could be paid. If this cannot be effected, he can see no other alternative, but to abandon the work at the close of the present year, and resort to other means to provide for expenditures, which many believe have contributed to benefit the public, by the diffusion of valuable information.

‘He has come to this conclusion with great reluctance, and it will give him pain to bid farewell to a large number of his subscribers, whose personal interest in the work has been fully expressed. He has not made known these circumstances earlier, because he had hoped to sustain its losses himself: but he feels more and more satisfied, that its permanency cannot be insured, unless the friends of education will unite in supporting it, by subscriptions, and by contributing to its pages. Could each subscriber consider himself an agent for life, we believe this could be accomplished. If *men of education* will not sustain it, the *ignorant* certainly will not do it. It has no *party character* or *popular attractions* to recommend it. Nor can it furnish the mass of matter, merely copied by the printer from foreign works, or present the attractive engravings, which give such wide circulation to some of our periodicals. It depends for its existence, on that number, comparatively small, who know how to prize solid and useful information. If they refuse their aid, it must expire.’

ART. X.—Dante.

L'Ottimo Commento della Divina Commedia, Testo Inedito d'un Contemporaneo di Dante. Citato degli Accademici della Crusca. Pisa. 1827.

A Commentary on the Divina Commedia of Dante, by one of his Contemporaries: now first published, and the same that is quoted by the Academy Della Crusca, under the title of L'Ottimo Commento, or the best Commentary.

HOMER created poetry from chaos:—Dante, from corruption. Both were animated by a divine spirit. The power, which restores freshness to the forest when the gloom

of winter has passed away, must be as mighty, as that which first calls it into being.

The imagination of Homer was exalted by the false, but splendid images of mythology. Every hill and every fountain had its poetic legend. From the sacred Olympus to the humblest rivulet that trickled through the Grecian plains, they were all hallowed by some mystic and divine association. The elements of poetry existed ; at the touch of genius, they awoke to life.

Very different was the period when Dante conceived his immortal work. Twenty-two centuries had elapsed. At the head of the ancient poets, Homer stood alone ;—in Grecian antiquity unrivalled, and in Latin antiquity with one noble imitator, who infused into his great work the richness and beauty of his model.

A long night of darkness had overspread the world. Europe was plunged into barbarism, wilder and more ferocious than that of the earliest ages of Greece. No heroic periods had intervened, to fill the soul of genius with poetic fire. The past was blank ;—the future enveloped in clouds ;—the present agitated by political strife,—by petty quarrels between priests and monarchs,—by civil discord between contending factions,—by fanatical disputes and useless controversies upon trifling subjects. No period could be less favorable to genius, whether we consider the condition of Italy in reference to religion, politics or literature.

The slaves attached to the soil, who peopled Europe during the middle ages, did not tremble before their masters more, than these feudal lords quailed before the power of the church. The Pope and the priesthood wielded the thunderbolts, which were believed to come from Heaven, and which, like those of Jupiter, were framed on earth. Even monarchs bowed before the Vicegerent of God,—and threw their jewelled diadems at the foot of the cross. The first talisman, projected by Gregory the Seventh for exalting the dominion of the Papal See, was excommunication ; the second, the celibacy of the priesthood ; the third, and that which rendered Rome the centre of influence, was the Holy Wars. Then earthly greatness was trampled in the dust ;—and the most powerful sovereigns of Christendom fought as subalterns, in the hope of obtaining an imperishable crown.

Meanwhile, the cities of Italy improved in wealth and pow-

er. The courage of every class was nerved by danger, and flourishing republics rose from amongst confusion. In the midst of civil discord, the Popes called in the aid of foreign conquerors; and in the life-time of Dante, a French Prince entered Italy, preaching concord to the republics, and holding out promises of liberty, in order to enslave them. The popular party was attached to the church and to France,—the aristocracy favored the descendants of the Cæsars.

But although the eyes of mankind began to be opened to the corruption and exorbitant ambition of the Roman Church, religion still maintained its influence. The poetic fictions of mythology had passed away;—the sun of paganism had set;—but the pure light of Christianity, which in after ages inspired Milton with his most sublime and affecting images, was darkened by the gloomy dreams of an abstract belief. With the utmost heretical license were mingled the grossest abuses of superstition. Astrologers were burned by the inquisition. The Jesuits amused the credulity of the public, by the revelation of innumerable visions with which they professed to be favored. A belief arose, that the last day was at hand;—and for nearly a century after the death of Dante, the dread of an approaching general judgment continued to agitate the whole of Christendom. When the Pope, at the end of the twelfth century, proclaimed a plenary indulgence to all who should perform a pilgrimage to Rome, it was calculated that, for several weeks, two hundred thousand foreigners succeeded each other daily at the gate of the Eternal City.

Literature had taken a scholastic turn. In the preceding century, St. Francis and St. Dominic had turned all the energy of their ardent minds towards the mysteries of religion. By their example, their preaching, their persecution, they had re-awakened the religious zeal, which for some time past had slumbered. The present was the age of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose writings had rendered the study of scholastic theology so universally prevalent. Intricate and useless disquisitions became the leading object of education. The passion for verbal subtlety, which distinguished the revival of letters in Italy, seems indeed to be one of the characteristics, which mark the first stage of the improvement of a nation. It prevailed, for instance, to a great extent, among the young men of Greece, in the days of the sophists. ‘Their facts,’ says a writer, ‘were

few, but their disputes were long ; if they could not convince, they could at least reason ; one absurdity led them to another, but every absurdity gave rise to a conflict of words,—and words, even without ideas, were as the breath of life to the loquacious Athenians.’

In the time of Dante, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise were forever present to the eyes of all good Christians, under a material form. The nature of the punishments prepared for the condemned in another world, was the constant subject of long and learned discussion. It was this state of public opinion and feeling, which no doubt suggested to Dante the plan of his work.

The poets who preceded him, imitating the Provençal bards, sought by far-fetched expressions to conceal their want of true feeling. Their language was rude and harsh,—an uncouth mixture of different tongues. A few love-songs, addressed to an imaginary beauty ; a few madrigals full of cold conceits and labored harmony,—these are now of little value in our eyes, except as proving the low state of poetry and the poverty of the language, before the appearance of the great Florentine. The names of Ciullo d’Alcamo, a Sicilian, Lucio Drusi of Pisa, Guido Guinicelli, Guido Cavalcante, Pierre de la Vigne and others, remind us of a train of ill-equipped attendants, announcing the approach of a mighty conqueror. The mysticism, then in fashion, was borrowed from the Academy. Poetry was a strange mixture of Mythology, Platonism, and Christianity ; a puerile combination of rhymes and rhythms, strung together to express a far-fetched compliment, conveyed in an allegory.

In the midst, then, of political dissensions in which he took an active part,—of a corrupt religion, productive either of gross superstition or of besotted atheism,—under the disadvantages of an infant literature and an unformed and semi-barbarous dialect, Dante arose like a giant amongst a generation of pigmies, and constructed that noble monument of genius, which, after a lapse of five centuries, remains without an equal, as it was without a model. The small lights, which faintly glimmered in the poetic horizon, were extinguished on the appearance of the great luminary. The poetry of Europe became impressed with a new character, and the beautiful language of Italy assumed a new being.

Dante was born in the year of our Lord, 1265 ; and his vis-

ionary journey through the realms of eternal sorrow, purification and bliss, is placed in the Holy Week of the year 1300; when the poet had attained his thirty-fifth year. He probably chose this year for the date of his poem, because it was the period of the jubilee, when multitudes of pilgrims thronged to Rome, to kneel before the holy relics; when the streets and the churches were crowded with persons of all ranks and ages, and presented a scene well calculated to impress the imagination of the poet. The time when he actually began to write his poem is uncertain.

He had not passed his life in seeing visions, or in dreaming dreams. His earthly pilgrimage was one of difficulty and struggle. The unclouded fortune which smiled upon his early years was speedily obscured, and the astrological predictions, which foretold his glory, seemed far from their fulfilment. In his youth, he devoted himself to the study of philosophy and speculative theology, and found relaxation from his severer pursuits in the exercise of his talents for music and painting. Naturally enthusiastic in the pursuit of knowledge, of a stern and contemplative disposition, the condition of his country prevented him from giving himself up to the one, or from indulging in the other. The tumults of the camp interfered with the repose of his private life; and such was his reputation as a statesman,* that he is said to have been employed in no less than fourteen embassies to foreign courts. He was also eminently distinguished for his personal courage; and at the battle of Campeldino was severely wounded, while fighting valiantly in the front rank of the Guelf cavalry.

After having been elevated to the chief dignities of the State,† and having been accustomed to the homage which was paid to his talents, wealth and official greatness, Dante at length found himself, by a political revolution, exiled from his native city, ‘driven about,’—to use his own pathetic words,—‘by the cold wind that springs out of sad poverty,’ and compelled to taste ‘how bitter is another’s bread,—how hard it is to mount and to descend another’s stairs.’ He wandered from city to city, trusting to the capricious favor of princes for a

* Boccaccio relates that Dante, when he was appointed Ambassador to Pope Boniface, broke out into this exclamation, ‘If I go, who is there to stay? If I stay, who is there to go?’

† In the year 1300, he was chosen chief of the Priors, who at that time held the principal authority in the republic.

temporary hospitality ; finding or fancying signs of coolness in the demeanor of his patrons ; unable to restrain his freedom of speech, or to model his haughty deportment to the lowly seeming, which became an exile and a dependent on the bounty of strangers.

If his public career was unfortunate, his private situation was not less so. It would seem, indeed, that misfortune is the best school for genius, which withers in the sunshine, but grows more vigorous in the storm. The favor of princes renders it cold and courtly ; domestic happiness frequently lulls it to sleep ;—but when the cords which bind it to earth are severed, it takes its natural flight towards a higher sphere. Thus Milton, bred in the midst of political factions and religious fanaticism, produced his immortal work when the external world was forever shut out from his sight. In his own recollections he found the model of those fierce passions which he represented ; and by investing them with a veil of sublimity, rendered them fitting attributes for his fallen spirits.

The most exquisite passages in the poem of Dante are produced by his eternal regret for the death of one, whom he loved with that pure and intense feeling which characterized him. The recollection of his youthful affection runs like a golden thread through the gloomy tissue of his thoughts, and illuminates, as with a stream of holy light, the mournful sublimity of his poem. Never was so noble a tribute of homage paid by a poet to the object of his adoration. He has made the name of Beatrice immortal as his own. His laurels bind her brows, and wherever the fame of Dante has reached, the memory of the wise and beautiful *Mona Bice* will be held in reverence.

He does not describe her character, nor, after the fashion of modern poets, dwell upon her beauty. He gives us a glimpse of her perfections in a few masterly touches. He places her in Paradise, and represents her, out of pity for him, as leaving her lofty abode, and imploring Virgil to rescue him from perdition, and guide him on his arduous journey. When his courage begins to fail, the magic name of Beatrice restores his fainting spirit ; and as he advances, she still watches his progress from her high station in the Empyrean. At length we meet her in her mystic chariot,—floating in clouds, and surrounded by angels,—clothed in brilliant colors,—her pure brow encircled by a crown of unfading olive,

—the brightness of those eyes, which mortal could not gaze upon, shaded by a veil of resplendent whiteness. Soft music announces her approach; but in the midst of her triumph, she addresses her lover in a tone of gentle sadness. We see her, wise and severe, moving him by just reproof to repentance and tears, yet feeling the interest of a sister in his welfare, instructing him in heavenly mysteries, guiding him from sphere to sphere through the regions of bliss, while the stars grow brighter at her presence,—and becoming more radiant herself as she approaches the source of Eternal Light. Nor is there perhaps a more charming picture in the *Commedia* than that, which represents her as resuming her station on a throne of light amongst saints and angels;—shining with new splendor,—encircled by divine rays,—yet casting from an infinite distance a sweet and beaming smile upon her lover.

This is the last impression we receive of her;—but her image never deserts the poet, and the prayer, which is offered up in his favor by Saint Bernard to the Holy Virgin, is in the name of the divine *Beatrice*.*

The allegorical attributes which the Poet ascribes to her, are in accordance with the taste of the age;—but, while other poets fell in love that they might sing their griefs, Dante sung because he loved.

—— ‘Io mi son un, che quando
Amore spira, noto, ed in quel modo
Ch’ei detta dentro, vo significando.’

—— ‘Count of me but as one,
Who am the scribe of love; that, when he breathes,
Take up my pen, and as he dictates, write.’

It is true that, after the death of Beatrice, and while he yet brooded in melancholy over a loss which seems to have admitted of no consolation, he was persuaded by his friends to marry a lady of high birth and fortune,—Gemma de Manetta de’Donati. As might have been expected, he, who had vowed to devote his genius to immortalize the memory of his first love, enjoyed little happiness in such a union. His

* The fortunate discovery of the portrait of Beatrice by Signor Melchior Messerini, must now silence all the doubts which have been thrown upon her actual existence. She is represented as young and beautiful;—her appearance and dress corresponding to the description given of both by the poet. The picture is supposed to be the work of Giotto or Oderigi.—*Vid. Com. di Messerini.—Firenze, 1832.*

biographers and commentators have represented this lady as a modern Xantippe. At all events, her kinsmen were devoted to the opposite political party ; and when the troubles of the republic drove the poet into exile, he was alone in his wanderings.

He found at length a permanent friend and benefactor, and one capable of appreciating a mind like his, in the Prince Guido Novello de' Polentani, the father of that unfortunate Francesca da Rimini, whose beautiful episode has excited the sympathy of succeeding ages, and inspired the genius of modern poets. But the unhappy fortune of Dante again pursued him. Being sent by Prince Guido to negotiate a peace with the Venetians, the citizens of that republic were so decidedly opposed to an accommodation with Ravenna, that they would not even admit the ambassador to an audience. Dante returned to the court of his patron ;—but an unconquerable sadness preyed ever after upon his spirit ; and in September, 1321, he died, in the 57th year of his age.

To enlighten the age in which he lived,—to show men the fate which awaited them in another sphere,—to make known his bold opinions on the subjects which then agitated all Christendom,—to evince his horror at the corruption of religion, and at the vices of his countrymen,—to hold up to the execration of posterity the most eminent men, who by their crimes had disgraced their high station,—and lastly, to leave an eternal record of his gratitude to the few and faithful friends who had cheered him in the hour of adversity,—such were the chief objects which Dante had in view, when he conceived the idea of his *Commedia*.

He appealed to the people in their native idiom,—and by selecting his words from the different Italian dialects,—by borrowing from the Latin, the Greek and the Provençal tongues, he infused new vigor and originality into his native language, and made known the wonderful harmony and energy of which the Italian is susceptible.

It has been said, that Dante also desired to gratify his private feelings of revenge. It would not seem so, from the impartiality with which he has consigned his friends and foes to a region of torture ; among the former, particularly, Francesca, the daughter of his patron, his master, Brunetto Latini, together with Guidoguerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Giacompo Rusticucci.

The author of the *Commedia* must have possessed a fund of knowledge beyond that of ordinary men. He is at once a moralist, a theologian, and an astronomer,—familiar with the study of ancient and profane classics,—the learned narrator of interesting events,—the energetic painter of the character and manners of his age. His astronomical knowledge is displayed in the mechanical construction of his spiritual world,—his theological lore and philosophical science in the various punishments allotted to the different personages who play their part on that vast theatre, and while the whole afforded ample scope for the exercise of his poetic genius, it also enabled him to illustrate those great moral lessons, which form the ostensible basis of his work.

The poem is a succession of pictures ;—representing scenes for the most part tragic, and consisting sometimes of a group, and sometimes of a single figure, a full length, a profile, or a sketch,—beheld by a dim, lurid light, imperfectly visible, and with an aspect dark, grim and terrible ; the features distorted by anguish, or severe in scorn, or serene in lofty dignity. The master stands like a powerful enchanter,—he waves his wand,—he traces the mysterious circle,—and evokes a succession of shades, which pass, like the spectral monarchs in *Macbeth*, in dim review before us. The past, the present, the future are shadowed forth, and our minds become oppressed with terror. Sometimes a form of light and loveliness is reflected to our view ;—we would make the fair vision stay,—and it is gone.

To enumerate the principal beauties, or to point out the most splendid scenes of the *Commedia*, would be a work of time and labor. To remark on the different symbolical meanings and allegories, which commentators have attached even to the first cantos of the *Inferno*, would be to enter into a nearly interminable discussion. We can only mention a very few of the most striking passages in this wonderful poem.

The translation by Cary seems to be the only English one, which conveys even a remote idea of the beauty of the original. He has followed his author with wonderful fidelity and exactness ; his style is as severe and devoid of ornament as that of Dante himself. He has wisely emancipated himself from the fetters of rhyme, and has walked along by the side of his great original with grave and measured

steps. The incalculable difficulties which a foreigner has to encounter, in appreciating the merits of a poem which the Italians themselves find difficulty in comprehending, render this work a valuable addition to English literature. Perhaps had a similar translation in the French language been practicable, Voltaire might have repented of his hasty judgment,—‘*Le Dante pourra entrer dans les bibliothèques des curieux, mais il ne sera jamais lu.*’

The first scene of the poem is decidedly allegorical, and has given rise to an infinity of explanations and commentaries. In the midst of the journey of life, the poet finds that he has wandered from the direct path, and is alone in a dark and wild forest. He knows not how he entered it, having been overwhelmed with sleep. He arrives at the foot of a hill, whose summit is gilded by the rays of the morning sun. He begins to ascend the hill, but his progress is opposed by a spotted panther,—a fierce lion,—and a hungry wolf. He draws back in terror, and perceives a human figure. It is the shade of Virgil, who had always been the object of his admiration. Virgil explains to him that, by the desire of Beatrice, he has left the place of his repose, and descended to earth for the purpose of guiding him in the direct path. Then the fear of the poet vanishes, and he expresses his renewal of courage in the beautiful simile,—

‘ Quale i fioretti, dal notturno gelo
Chinati e chiusi, poi che’l sol gl’imbianca,
Si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo;
Tal mi fec’io di mia virtute stanca.’

‘ As flowerets by the frosty air of night,
Bent down and closed, when day has blanched their leaves,
Rise all unfolded on their spiry stems;
So was my fainting vigor new restored.’

The expounders of Dante have expended great labor in their explanation of this first and principal allegory. Most of the ancient commentators were of opinion, that ‘the dark and wild forest in the midst of life’s journey,’ referred to the innumerable vices and depraved passions of Dante,—that ‘the goodly mount’ signified virtue,—the leopard, lion and wolf, luxury, ambition and avarice,—Virgil, moral philosophy,—and Beatrice, theology. Again, some modern commentators, among many arguments against the correctness of this interpretation,

having observed that Virgil, in explaining to Dante the reasons of Charon's refusal to ferry him over in his bark, says,—

‘Quinci non passa mai anima buona,’

‘Hence ne’er hath past good spirit,’

justly remark that this expression could not be applied to one sunk in vice; and have therefore supposed the dark forest to allude to the vices and passions, not of Dante, but of mankind in general.

A modern writer * has probably arrived at a more just interpretation of the text. He brings many ingenious arguments to prove, that *the wild and deserted forest* signifies the misery of Dante, deprived by exile of all that he most valued,—the *goodly mountain* the peace and consolation for which he longed,—his *passage from the forest to the mountain* the increase of hope in his soul;—*the light of the new day* the consolation which he derived from hope,—the *leopard*, beautiful and cruel, Florence,—the *lion* France,—the *wolf* the church of Rome;—the apparition of *Virgil, sent by Beatrice*, an alleviation to his sorrows by study; the *way by which Virgil promised to draw him from that valley*, his admirable poem, which might induce his country to free him from exile,—and *the guidance of Virgil* the necessary virtue, which he derived from meditating on the works of the Altissimo Poeta.

The opening scene of the third canto is magnificent. The poet and his guide stand before the everlasting gates of the infernal regions, and read their terrible inscription.

‘Per me si va nella città dolente :

Per me si va nell’ eterno dolore ;

Per me si va tra la perduta gente.

Giustizia mosse ’l mio alto fattore

Fecemi la divina potestate

La somma sapienza, e’l primo amore.

Dinanzi a me non fur cose create

Se non eterne, ed io eterno duro ;

Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’ entrate.’

‘Through me you pass into the city of woe,

Through me among the people lost for aye.

Justice the founder of my fabric moved ;

To rear me was the task of Power divine,

* Giovanni Marchetti.

Supremest Wisdom, and primeval Love.
 Before me things create were none, save things
 Eternal, and eternal I endure.
 All hope abandon,—ye who enter here.'

Although the Divine Comedy must completely baffle the rules of French criticism, we cannot but be astonished, on reading M. Sismondi's translation of various passages of Dante, at the want, either of attention or knowledge of the language, displayed by that celebrated writer on various occasions; and on none more than in his translation of this very passage. Dante, who is always a theologian even in the midst of the most poetical ideas, by

———— 'Power Divine,
 Supremest Wisdom and Primeval Love,'

evidently refers to the three persons of the Trinity. M. Sismondi overlooks this intention, and thereby entirely alters the sense of the passage, which he renders thus;

'Pour moi s'unit à la haute puissance,
 Le sage Amour du divin Créateur.'

While the terrible inscription appears traced in obscure characters upon Hell's portal,—sighs, groans and lamentations, mingled with hoarse and angry voices, are heard from within. Virgil explains to his pupil, that this is the abode of those indifferent men who on earth did neither good nor evil; who hid their talent in the ground. They are mingled with the angels who were neither rebellious nor true to their Maker. Neither heaven, nor hell will receive them. The shade of the Mantuan mentions them with unutterable scorn.

'Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;
 Misericordia e giustizia gli sdegna.
 Non ragionam di lor, ma guarda, e passa.'

———— 'Fame of them the world hath none,
 Nor suffers, mercy and justice scorn them both.
 Speak not of them, but look, and pass them by.'

The spirits are ferried over the Acheron by Charon, with eyes of 'burning coal;' for Dante has no scruple in mingling the ancient mythological belief with the new,—the poetic coloring of Greek mythology with the terrors of catholicism. He boldly dips his pencil into the declining rays of the gorgeous heathen sun-set, and blends them with the fantastic clouds which obscured the new Aurora.

‘Caron demonio con occhi di bragia,
Loro accennando, tutte le raccoglie;
Batte col remo qualunque si adagia.’

———‘Charon, demoniac form,
With eyes of burning coal, collects them all,
Beck’ning; and each, that lingers, with his oar
Strikes.’

Michel-Angelo, in his Last Judgment, has designed the ideas of Dante, with the exactness of a faithful translator. He has been especially true to his original in the figure of Charon in his bark, striking the lingering spirits with his oar. It is a matter of eternal regret to the admirers both of the poet and the artist, that a copy of Landino’s Commentary of Dante, which was enriched with designs by Michel-Angelo of all the figures mentioned in the poem, in every variety of action and attitude,—was lost in a sea-voyage.

Minos, the Judge of Ancient Hell, is introduced by Dante as a modern Demon. Here Buonarotti again follows the ideas of Dante, and with something of the satiric genius of the Poet, has revenged himself on one Biagio da Cesena, who displeased him by some criticisms on his works,—by painting him to the life under the figure of the Infernal Judge.*

It is in the circle over which Minos presides, that the horrors of the Infernal regions commence. Until then, we meet only those whose sole crime was ignorance of the truths of Christianity;—they are sad, but suffer no torture.

‘Genti v’eran con occhi tardi e gravi,
Di grande autorità ne’ lor sembianti:
Parlavan rado con voci soavi.’

‘There dwelt a race, who slow their eyes around
Majestically moved, and in their port
Bore eminent authority: they spake
Seldom, but all their words were tuneful sweet.’

And now begins a series of the most appalling pictures, that the human imagination has ever conceived; different gradations of horror and degrees of torture, represented in such vivid

* It is said that Messer Biagio having complained to the Pope of the liberty which the painter had taken with his features, his Holiness asked him, in what part of the picture Michel-Angelo had placed him, and Biagio having replied that he was painted in Hell, ‘Had he placed you in Purgatory,’ said the Pope, ‘there would have been some remedy;—but in hell, *nulla est redemptio*.’

colors, that we can scarcely smile at the popular belief that Dante actually descended into Hell ;—‘and that his sallow complexion and crisp beard were owing to his having ventured too near the fire.’*

‘Christianity,’ says M. Ginguéné, ‘attributes to Hell but two kinds of punishment ;—fire and eternal damnation ; that is to say, the eternal deprivation of the sovereign good. Dante borrowed from the hell of the ancients the idea of a variety of torments, suited to the diversity of crimes ;—and this idea, which saved him from a fatiguing uniformity, furnished him with numerous pictures, contrasts and gradations of terror. Wind, rain, hail, devouring and gnawing insects, kindled tombs, burning sands, monstrous serpents, flames, frozen plains, and at length an ocean of transparent ice, under which the damned suffer, and keep eternal silence,—such are the terrible resources which he found in this fruitful idea.’

Terror and pity are the chief emotions which agitate us, as we read these vivid descriptions. The mind reposes with a more mournful interest and one of a gentler nature, upon some passages ;—as for instance on the affecting episode of Francesca da Rimini, so well-known, so universally admired, and which can never lose its charm, so long as one human heart beats with human feeling. Truly this episode is as a trembling moon-beam amidst the dark storm,—soft, gentle and melancholy,—yet deepening by contrast the surrounding gloom. There is one touch in it which evinces the poet’s intimate knowledge of human nature. It is that where Francesca, while her lover stands sighing by her side, silent and sunk in grief, exclaims with a kind of desperate joy ;

‘Questi, che mai da me non sia diviso ;’

‘He who ne’er from me shall separate.’

The contrast between the feelings of the lovers is finely imagined.

The chief reason of our intense interest in this poem is the dim, uncertain light by which the various scenes are beheld. Something always remains through which we cannot penetrate ; some object, to discover which we strain our eyes in the obscurity. This love of mystery is inherent in the human mind. It is the aspiring of the immortal soul after that knowledge, which cannot be acquired on this side the grave.

* Giovanni Boccaccio.

Like Dante, we find ourselves in the midst of life's journey. We know not whence we came, nor whither we go; and we shall seek to penetrate the darkness, and to elucidate the mysterious truths, which revelation has dimly shadowed forth, till eternal light shall be poured upon the obscurity. Then, like the poet, when he drank of the pure waters of Paradise, and was admitted to a view of the Eternal City, we shall quench our thirst at the Everlasting Fountain, and our eyes being opened, we shall find how trifling is the sum of all human knowledge.

The horror of the words which commence the seventh canto, consists in their obscurity. Commentators have sought in vain to expound their meaning;—they remain the hoarse, unintelligible roar of a Demon.

‘Pape Satan, Pape Satan, aleppe,’

here even the genius of Buonarotti would be limited; he might give us the figure of Pluto, but the terror lies chiefly in the mystic sound of the verse.

Cary's translation,

‘Ah me! O Satan! Satan!’

does not convey the same impression. The words continue to startle us, as the miraculous writing on the wall appalled Belshazzar; but there is no Daniel to give the interpretation.

The description of the City of Dis, with its burning towers, guarded by innumerable demons, who furiously oppose the entrance of a living man, is sublime in horror; and the angry angel, traversing the Styx with unwet feet, announced by a ‘loud-crashing’ and terrible sound that made either shore tremble, is a grand and fearful picture.

There is something inexpressibly dreary and horrible in the description of the vast plains, covered with open sepulchres, and separated by flames which burn forever, without consuming their victims. A voice issues from the midst, and the proud Farinata, who scorns even the torments of hell, lifts his head from his tomb, on hearing the language of his native land. He disdainfully inquires who were the poet's ancestors, and recognising in him a political adversary, proudly recounts his exploits.

Yet even here there is a beautiful touch of simple and gentle feeling. Cavalcante, the father of Guido, rises from his tomb, and eagerly inquires for his son,—then thinking from the

hesitation of Dante that the prince is no more, he falls back supinely into his sepulchre, forgetting his own fate in sorrow for that of his son, deprived forever of 'the blessed day-light.'

In proportion as the crimes of the lost souls have been more atrocious, the horrors of their torments increase. We pass into the abyss guarded by the Minotaur and the Centaurs,—we cross the river of boiling blood, in which are plunged the souls of tyrants,—we follow the poet, in his dreary journey through the dark forest, whose trees bear thorns and poison, and in whose rough and knotted trunks dwell the imprisoned souls of suicides, to the plain of burning sand, on which descends an eternal rain of fiery flakes,—till at length the imagination, nearly fatigued with all these horrors, gladly reposes upon a more gentle picture.

In the midst of the burning sands, one of the pale and trembling phantoms recognises Dante. It is the shade of his master, Brunetto Latini. The poet approaches, in an attitude of profound reverence and pity, and, with words full of tenderness, expresses his unchanging gratitude for the care which Brunetto had taken of him in his youth.

The winged monster Geryon, wheeling his downward flight through the darkness, with his trembling rider, is an image at once grotesque and sublime. He swims slowly through the void, where no sound is heard, but the roar of the torrent descending to the gulf. 'This extraordinary descent,' says M. Ginguené, 'is painted with frightful reality. We partake the terrors of the poet, thus suspended over the abyss, and we almost feel our head grow giddy as we see him descend.'

We feel increasing wonder at the genius of the poet, when the same pencil, which produced these images of horror, traces with equal spirit a picture of the simple cares and comforts of the villager.

'In quella parte del giovinetto anno,
Che' l sole i crin sotto l'Aquario tempra,
E già le notti al mezzo dì sen vanno :
Quando la brina in su la terra assempra
L'immagine di sua sorella bianca,
Ma poco dura alla sua penna tempra ;
Lo villanello, a cui la roba manca,
Si leva, e guarda, e vede la campagna
Biancheggiar tutta, ond' ei si batte l'anca :

Ritorna a casa, e qua e là si lagna,
 Come 'l tapin, che non sa che si faccia :
 Poi riede, e la speranza ringavagna,
 Veggendo 'l mondo aver cangiata faccia
 In poco d'ora, e prende suo vincastro,
 E fuor le pecorelle a pascere caccia.

' In the year's early nonage, when the sun
 Tempers his tresses in Aquarius' urn,
 And now towards equal day the nights recede,
 When, as the rime upon the earth puts on
 Her dazzling sister's image, but not long
 Her milder sway endures ; then riseth up
 The village hind, whom fails his wintry store,
 And looking out beholds the plain around
 All whitened : whence impatiently he smites
 His thighs, and to his hut returning in,
 There paces to and fro, wailing his lot,
 As a discomfited and helpless man ;
 Then comes he forth again, and feels new hope
 Spring in his bosom, finding e'en thus soon
 The world hath changed its countenance, grasps his crook,
 And forth to pasture drives his little flock.

Perhaps none but those who are banished forever from their native land, can fully appreciate the natural beauty of those lines, where a condemned soul, tormented by devouring thirst, recalls to his mind the clear streams and shady groves of Italy. The remembrance of its blue skies and balmy air is of itself sufficient torture.

' Li ruscelletti, che de' verdi colli
 Del Casentin, discendon giuso in Arno,
 Facendo i lor canali e freddi e molli,
 Sempre mi stanno innanzi, e non indarno,
 Che l' immagine lor via più m'asciuga,
 Che 'l male ond'io nel volto mi discarno.'

' The rills, that glitter down the grassy slopes
 Of Casentino, making fresh and soft
 The banks whereby they glide to Arno's stream,
 Stand ever in my view ; and not in vain ;
 For more the pictured semblance dries me up,
 Much more than the disease, which makes the flesh
 Desert these shrivelled cheeks.'

The gloom and sublimity are less broken in upon by gentle images, as we descend lower into the regions of despair. We

arrive at the central pit, guided by that false light, which was 'less than the night and less than the day ;'—where the blast of the horn resounds among the gigantic forms, which are ranged like towers on the brink of the abyss. In the last circle with its frozen lake, where the assassins are plunged in 'thick-ribbed ice,' we arrive at the magnificent episode of Ugolino.

As the Francesca da Rimini moves us with pity, so here our tears are congealed with horror ;—and yet, as the wretched father himself says ;—

' Ben se' crudel, se tu già non ti duoli,
Pensando ciò, ch'al mio cuor s'annunziava :
E se non piangi, di che pianger suoli ? '

——' Right cruel art thou, if no pang
Thou feel'st at thinking what my heart foretold ;
And if not now, why use thy tears to flow ? '

It is the simplicity, the pathos, with which is recorded the dreadful fact of a father and his children shut up in a lone tower overlooking the Arno, and left there to perish with hunger, that freezes our blood as we read. They hear the gates locked, the key is thrown into the river. The children, who in their sleep wept, and asked for bread, awaken. The father looks at them, and sheds no tear. They weep,—and his little Anselm says

' Tu guardi sì, padre ; che hai ? '

' Thou lookest so ! Father, what ails thee ? '

Days pass on.—One by one the children die. Humanity shudders at the rest. It seems as if a word more, a word less, would mar the terrible simplicity of the picture.

Lucifer, ' that Emperor, who sways the realm of sorrow,'—surrounded by eternal ice, solitude, and silence, is the last gigantic picture of the Inferno.

We feel as if we breathed a new atmosphere ; as if, like the poet himself, we washed from our faces the smoke of the infernal braziers ; when we arrive at the opening canto of Purgatory. The style suddenly becomes serene and brilliant, like a song of triumph after a funeral chant. The poet stands by the sea, at the foot of the mountain of Purgatory, and rejoices in his passage from obscurity to light. Nearly the first picture which we behold is a bark, floating rapidly over the waters, filled with souls on their way to the region of purification, con-

ducted by an angel with white and luminous wings, which strike the air, and guide the boat. Sounds of holy melody are heard. The shades are chanting the hymn, which was sung by the Israelites on leaving Egypt.

Among the spirits, Dante meets with his friend and musical instructor, Casella. The living man would embrace the shade, and finds nothing but empty air. Then Dante prays Casella to sing, if death has not made him lose the remembrance of his art; and the musician sings one of the canzones of the poet, with so melodious and touching a voice, that the shades crowd round to listen, and stand enraptured. The music of Italy,—the melody of other days, sung by the sea-shore of another world,—forms a beautiful scene, and fills the mind with a pleasing sadness.

Alone, and apart from a crowd of shades, the poet observes the proud Italian bard, Sordello of Mantua, famed for the harmony of his verses; the favorite poet of the people in the days of chivalry; who united the glory of military renown to his poetic talent; one of those troubadour-chevaliers, ‘who could only breathe their harmonious sighs at the feet of a princess.’ He does not answer when Virgil speaks to him,

——— ‘*Lasciava lo gir, solo guardando
A guisa di leon quando si posa.*

——— ‘*But let him onward pass,
Eyeing us as a lion on his watch.*

But when he hears that Virgil is a native of Mantua, he rises and embraces him;—and on learning that he is none other than the ‘Glory of Latium,’ he falls at his feet.

The approach of evening is announced in these beautiful and affecting lines.

‘*Era già l’ora che volge ’l disio
A’ naviganti e’ ntenerisce ’l cuore,
Lo dì, che han detto a’dolci amici, a Dio;
E che lo nuovo peregrin d’ amore
Punge, se ode squilla di lontano,
Che paja ’l giorno pianger che si muore.*

‘*Now was the hour that wakens fond desire
In men at sea, and melts their thoughtful heart
Who in the morn have bid sweet friends farewell,
And pilgrim newly on his road with love*

Thrills, if he hear the vesper bell from far,
That seems to mourn for the expiring day.'

Though Purgatory is a region of pain and sorrow, it is sorrow illuminated by hope. The terror which weighed down our spirits in the regions of despair ceases; the pictures assume a brighter character; their coloring becomes more brilliant. The poem is now enriched with glowing descriptions, mingled with natural and pathetic ideas. The soft and holy music, the angels with their brilliant robes, golden hair and snow-white wings,—the meeting between friends who had on earth known and loved one another, and who continue to take a deep interest in the affairs of a world which remains vivid in the memories of those, who have not yet tasted of the joys of Paradise,—the whole is mingled with thoughts so just and philosophical, and with so profound a knowledge of human nature, as to justify the epithet of *divine*, which has been bestowed upon the work.

When they have passed from circle to circle, and have arrived at the last which conducted to the terrestrial Paradise, the angel of God appears before them.

'E cantava : *Beati mundo corde*,
In voce assai più che la nostra viva,
Poscia : più non si va, se pria non morde,
Anime sante, il fuoco : entrate in esso,
Ed al cantar di là non siate sorde.'

———' "Blessed are the pure
In heart," he sang, then near him as we came,
"Go ye not further, holy spirits!" he cried,
"Ere the fire pierce you : enter in : and list
Attentive to the song ye hear from thence."'

When the poet hesitates to enter into the flames through which he must pass before reaching Paradise, Virgil says

———' or vedi, figlio,
'Fra Beatrice e te é questo muro.'

———' Mark now, my son,'
'From Beatrice thou art by this wall
Divided.'

At the name of Beatrice, Dante unresistingly follows his guide.

The Terrestrial Paradise is the emblem of primitive innocence, or, according to some theologians, the type of the

church. The description of the young and beautiful Matilda, singing and gathering flowers by the side of the limpid waters, under the shadows of the eternal trees,—her sweet laugh, brilliant eyes, and melodious song,—is a beautiful picture, whatever be its allegorical meaning.

The approach of Beatrice is announced with pomp and splendor. The whole forest becomes brilliantly illuminated, and a soft melody is heard through the air. The symbolic procession which follows is taken from the sacred images in the Old Testament; and the hymns, partly from the Psalms of David, and partly from the writings of Virgil.

The mysterious chariot, which contains the object of the poet's deathless adoration, is surrounded by saints and angels who sing 'in holy chant,'—and shower around them 'unwithering lilies.'

‘Io vidi già nel cominciar del giorno,

La parte oriental tutta rosata,

E l'altro ciel di bel sereno adorno,

E la faccia del Sol nascere ombrata

Sì che per temperanza di vapori

L'occhio lo sostenea lunga fiata;

Così dentro una nuvola di fiori,

Che dalle mani angeliche saliva

E ricadeva giù dentro e di fuori,

Sovra candida vel, cinta d'oliva,

Donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto,

Vestita di color di fiamma viva.

E lo spirito mio, che già cotanto

Tempo era stato con la sua presenza,

Non era di stupor, tremando, affranto.

Senza degli occhi aver pur conoscenza,

Per occulta virtù, che da lei mosse,

D'antico amor senti 'la gran potenza.'

I have beheld, ere now, at break of day

The eastern clime all roseate, and the sky

Opposed, one deep and beautiful serene;

And the sun's face so shaded, and with mists

Attenuated at his rising, that the eye

Long while endured the sight; thus, in a cloud

Of flowers, that from those hands angelic rose,

And down within and outside of the car

Fell showering, in white veil with olive wreathed

A virgin in my view appeared, beneath

Green mantle, robed in hue of living flame,

And o'er my spirit, that so long a time
Had from her presence felt no shuddering dread,
Albeit mine eyes discerned her not, there moved
A hidden virtue from her, at whose touch
The power of ancient love was strong within me.'

He turns towards Virgil, to express his awe and rapture ; but Virgil, his guide and 'best-loved father,' has left him ;— and in a transport of mingled feeling, he weeps. Then, for the first time, Beatrice speaks,

'Dante, perchè Virgilio se ne vada,
Non piangere anche, non piangere ancora,
Che pianger ti convien per altra spada.'

'Dante ! weep not that Virgil leaves thee ; nay
Weep thou not yet : behoves thee feel the edge
Of other sword, and thou shalt weep for that.'

The only human interest, which we feel after entering Paradise, is in the poet himself. We cannot sympathize in the perfect happiness of those glorious beings, who feel neither hope nor fear. The whole becomes a scene of splendor and beauty, music and light ; and in the midst of all this ethereal glory are theological discussions and metaphysical disquisitions, making of Paradise an academic school, surrounded by the most brilliant and magic coloring.

As they advance in their aerial journey, Beatrice fixes her eagle gaze on the sun, and the poet looks in her eyes, until their brightness grows too dazzling. They hear the harmony of the spheres, and the astronomical system is explained by Beatrice. They visit Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter,—they ascend to Saturn on a golden ladder covered with stars ; and having entered the constellation Gemini, the poet turns his glance towards the earth, and smiles at its 'pitiful semblance.'

Each planet is inhabited by myriads of happy souls ; and as they ascend higher, the beauty of Beatrice becomes more radiant ; until it is as difficult to gaze upon her, as upon the stars themselves.

They visit the garden, where, among innumerable flowers of a thousand dyes, blooms the mystic Rose, in which the Word became flesh. This is the figure, under which the Catholic Poets have always delighted to speak of the Holy Virgin. She is surrounded by 'legions of splendors,' amidst melody to which the sweetest earthly music sounds as 'a rent cloud,

when it grates the thunder.' The whole description is gorgeous in design and coloring, and the scene terminates by the holy legions chanting the '*Regina Cæli*,'

'So sweetly, the delight hath left me never.'

The splendor grows fatiguing. The emblematical meaning, contained in the descriptions, can alone 'give interest to the enumeration of the nine choirs of angels, burning eternally with Divine Love,—of the Seraphim and Cherubim,—the Dominions, Virtues and Powers,—the Principalities and Archangels. Another source of interest, to the men of that period, consisted in the scholastic discussions on the divine essence and nature of angels; in the discourse of St. Peter, in which he inveighs against the corruption of the church of Rome, and in the satirical reflections upon priests and priestcraft, which seem unworthy of souls in a state of holiness and bliss.

In the ninth circle, all is light, and love, and joy. A river of light flows through the centre, bordered with flowers of incredible beauty. From the river issued brilliant sparkles, which flew amongst the flowers, where they seemed like 'rubies chased in gold.' By the desire of Beatrice, Dante drinks of this water, and his eyes being opened, he sees that the sparks are angels, and the flowers, mortals. He beholds in a vast circle of light more than a million of thrones, disposed like the leaves of a rose, where sit angels and the souls of just men made perfect. An innumerable host of celestial beings, with faces of flame and wings of gold, float over the Eternal City. Here Beatrice leaves him, and resumes her throne of light, 'in the third circle from the highest.'

The poet's next guide is the venerable Saint Bernard, who, in a beautiful and solemn prayer, supplicates the Virgin Mary that Dante may be enabled to contemplate the brightness of the Divine Majesty. The prayer is heard. He receives a glimpse of the Great Mystery; and declares his inability to describe what he beheld.

Here terminates this wonderful poem,—*unique* in its beauties, and even in its faults. The age was answerable for the latter; the merit of the former belongs to the poet. 'There is more to be learned,' says Alfieri, 'from the faults of Dante, than from the beauties of any other writer.'

If posthumous glory can soothe the shade of departed genius, the stern spirit of Dante may repose in peace. The

first tribute paid to his memory was by Guido ; and the voice of friendship pronounced his funeral oration. Ravenna, which received the stranger in exile, first mourned his loss, and hal-
lowed his remains.

But death is a fire, which purifies the true gold from the extraneous dross. Florence mourned, when too late, her ingratitude towards the noblest of her sons. His fellow-citizens humbled themselves before the memory of the illustrious dead. From hatred they passed to admiration,—from admiration, to awe and reverence. Like the barbarians, among whom Saint Paul sought shelter at Melita, after denouncing him as a criminal, they were now ready to worship him as a God.

Already was accomplished the prediction, which the poet puts into the mouth of Ser Brunetto.

‘ La tua fortuna tanto onor ti serba,
Che l’una parte, e l’altra avranno fame
Di te.’

‘ Thy fortune hath such honor in reserve,
That thou by either party shalt be craved
With hunger keen.’

Embassies were sent to Ravenna to implore the restoration of the poet’s ashes to his birth-place, but the request was refused. Michel-Angelo,—whose genius so closely resembled that of the ‘ *gran padre Alighier*,’ that his sculpture is like the poetry of Dante in marble,—Michel-Angelo himself in after ages repeated the prayer in vain. Even the authoritative demand of the Pope was unheeded ; and Florence remains exposed to the reproach of the traveller, who vainly searches among her illustrious dead for the tomb of the Father of Italian poetry.*

‘ Ungrateful Florence ! Dante sleeps afar,
Like Scipio, buried by the upbraiding shore ;
Thy factions, in their worse than civil war,
Proscribed the bard, whose name for evermore
Their children’s children would in vain adore
With the remorse of ages :’

* A magnificent tribute has, however, been paid by Florence to the memory of Dante. In the church of Santa Croce, which contains the ashes of Galileo, of Alfieri, and of Michel-Angelo, a splendid mausoleum has been erected in honor of the great poet. It is the workmanship of Stefano Ricci, a Florentine sculptor, and was completed in the year 1829.

In ancient days, he would have been deified. In a Christian country, though altars did not blaze, statues were raised and medals coined in his honor. Besides the profound and subtle allegory which the poem contained, and the bold strain of prophetic denunciation which it assumed, it had a yet stronger hold on the curiosity of the age in which it was written. A strong personal interest was felt in discovering the key to the various characters therein represented. The most illustrious families beheld their kinsmen and acquaintance, their friends and foes, registered in this undying record,—as in the enjoyment of perpetual bliss, or consigned to eternal infamy. A line, a word frequently designated them; their place of abode, their heraldic insignia, the catastrophe of their death, sometimes the one crime which had blotted their escutcheon.

Homer retraced the heroic ages of Greece; Virgil, those of ancient Italy; Milton, in later times, chose for his theme the history and fate of the original parents of mankind. His characters were angels of light and darkness; or man in his primitive state, but a little lower than the angels themselves. These poets were travellers in unknown and distant regions, who were enabled to display to their fellow-men the marvellous treasures, which they had brought from an unexplored land. They exhibited to their countrymen those great names which are hallowed by the lapse of ages,—heroes, whose mighty deeds raised them to the rank of gods; or mortals, coeval with creation's dawn, with whom the celestial spirits deigned to hold communion.

It was not so with the great Florentine. His characters were those of his own period, with whose history the public were acquainted, and whose families and descendants were alive, and frequently in the enjoyment of wealth and power. But the position in which he placed them, threw an interest round their story, stronger than could have been produced by the adventures of any individual, however illustrious, of a more remote date. The terror and pity, and in some cases the vengeance of the Italians was awakened, when the shadowy forms of their contemporaries were made to pass in review before them, stripped of those external advantages which while living had rendered them respected, and had cast a veil over their crimes. The cruel husband shrunk from the picture of his murdered wife, herself condemned to perdition, yet prophesying that for him was destined the lowest pit in hell.

The son beheld his father plunged in eternal wo, yet continuing to feel a tender interest in his welfare. The treacherous assassin, who still occupied his place among the nobles of the land, trembled at seeing himself represented as in hell, while, according to the bold supposition of the poet, a demon animated his body. The 'mighty mantle' itself was no protection to the wearer. Pope Nicholas III., plunged head foremost in the flames, was represented as waiting there for the arrival of his guilty successors. The effect was indescribable. Some, unable to endure the contempt of their countrymen, condemned themselves to voluntary exile; some, struck with terror and despair, died broken-hearted; and others fell victims to the private vengeance of the poet's friends.*

The two sons of Dante, together with another anonymous writer, were the first commentators on the *Commedia*. In 1350, the Archbishop of Milan, Giovanni Visconti, assigned this office to six learned men, two theologians, two philosophers, and two *literati*. At Florence, a public chair was instituted for the sole purpose of illustrating the mysteries of the Poem of Dante. Each verse was read and expounded in the churches, like a text from Holy Writ. The first who filled the office, was the eloquent Boccaccio; and when death put a period to his labors, his successors were chosen from the most learned men of the age. Among them were Antonio Piovano, and Filippo Villani.

The example of Florence was followed by Bologna, Pisa, Placenza and Venice. At Bologna, the office of lecturer on Dante was sustained, for ten years, by Benvenuto da Imola.

The four chief commentators on the *Commedia* were Cristoforo Landino, Alessandro Velutello, the Jesuit Venturi, and the Padre Lombardi. The first, who lived at the time of the invention of printing, when the criticism of words formed a study apart from all others, is sometimes unnecessarily prolix, and sometimes more visionary than his text; but he had at least the advantage of living but a century after Dante, while Florence yet retained some of her ancient simplicity. Velutello, in the next century, did little or nothing towards illustrating the poetical beauties of Dante, though he may be regarded as a steady and useful guide. Both these commen-

* Biagioli, pref., p. IV., Note 2.

tators are in some danger of meeting with the fate, which Voltaire predicted of the *Commedia* itself.

In the nineteenth century, when the Jesuits had become the sole directors of the education of youth, and when their great object was to decry the merits of a poem from whose authority Protestant authors admitted of no appeal, Venturi, one of their order, biassed by his principles, endeavored by every means in his power to exaggerate the faults, and to throw discredit on the religious opinions displayed in the poem.

Tiraboschi, usually so diligent a critic, passed over the *Commedia* with the mention of a few dates, and some critical notices of no value. Sperone Speroni, then reckoned an oracle of literature, ventured, however, in defiance of the power and hostility of the Jesuits, to express his admiration of the *Commedia*.

Soon after the fall of the Jesuits, Lombardi, a Franciscan, disgusted with their malignity and false taste, wrote his *Commentary on Dante*,—the most useful historical criticism of the work, which has yet appeared. Having examined an old edition, called the *Nidobeatina*, he inserted in his comment the various readings which are to be found in each page, and which sometimes illustrate, and sometimes embellish the verses. But his partiality for this edition rendered him disingenuous and partial in his representation of the others. Above all, he openly attacked the Florentine edition, which bears the date of 1595, and has always been held in reverence by the learned.

The *literati* were roused by this attack. The chief antagonist of Lombardi was Monsignor Dionisi of Verona, who made war not only on the *Nidobeatina*, but on all other editions, ancient and modern, without excepting the Florentine. The commentary of Lombardi was published in 1791. Five years afterwards, Dionisi's edition was splendidly printed at the *Bodoni* press, but was found to contain the most striking errors of the numerous copyists, whom the editor had examined. Lombardi, although he published his commentary, did not dare to put his name to the work. His initials alone were given, with a picture of Dante, and an obscure inscription, intimating the danger he was in from the power which had trampled upon kings and emperors.

In the nineteenth century, Cionacci, a noble Florentine, projected an edition of the *Divina Commedia* in one hundred vol-

umes, of which one was to be appropriated to each canto, together with a Latin translation from the Strozzi library. This translation, which has never been printed, is now in the Vatican. It was made by Giovanni di Serravalle, Prince Bishop of Fermo. He executed the work at the particular request of two English prelates, who were among the clergy of the Council of Constance;—Nicholas, Bishop of Bath, and Robert, Bishop of Salisbury. Cionacci published a catalogue of four hundred and fifty-two editions of Dante, existing in his day!

Yet notwithstanding the numerous commentators and learned critics, who for five centuries have exercised their ingenuity, and sometimes the patience of their readers, in illustrating the obscurities of the *Commedia*,—notwithstanding the new light thrown upon these by Biagioli,—Foscolo,—Monti,—Petricari and others,—the poem yet remains an inexhaustible mine, from which fresh treasures may be extracted. Time cannot abate the enthusiasm of its admirers; fashion and novelty have no influence over its ever-during truths.

Volumes might be written concerning the various works which, for the last three centuries, have thrown light on the words and phrases of Dante. Some are in the perishable form of pamphlets; others, in the shape of folio volumes, are buried in the libraries. Yet one of the chief duties of an editor,—that of illustrating the obscure allusions of his author,—has hitherto been executed, in the case of the *Commedia*, with more attention than success.

‘All the other great poems in the world,’ says Foscolo, united together, do not perhaps contain so many allusions, as the *Divine Comedy* alone. The poem of Dante comprehends the whole history of his age,—all that was then known of arts, letters and sciences;—the manners, the customs, the principles of his period, and their origin in preceding ages, as well as the theological opinions and their great ascendancy over the minds and actions of men. His allusions are rapid, various, and succeed each other with the rapidity of lightning.’ Anecdotes are related,—manners are mentioned,—crimes are recorded, of which no contemporary writer has taken notice.

It is chiefly in this point of view that the publication, which is placed at the head of this article, must be hailed with pleasure by every admirer of Dante, even while regretting that so valuable a commentary should not have appeared

during the life-time of some of the most learned critics of the *Commedia*. It was published but a few years since, at Pisa, and is one of those from which the first compilers of the *Vocabulario* took upwards of fifteen hundred words; entitling it sometimes '*il Buono*,'—sometimes '*l'Ottimo*,' and sometimes '*l'Antico Comento*.' It is recommended to the attention of the learned, in the preface by the Signor Alessandro Torri, in these words :

'Publishing at length, after three years of continued study and labor, "*l'Ottimo Comento*" on the *Divina Commedia*, we do not think it necessary by pompous and flowery language to increase its importance, or to boast of its utility. This is one of the few books which recommend themselves; and instead of pointing out the reasons which have induced us to publish it, we ought rather to make known the various causes, which, to the detriment of human learning, have, until this day, prevented or retarded its publication.'

The author of this very ancient and curious commentary is not yet discovered. That it is a genuine copy, and above all, that it was written by a contemporary of Dante, seems clearly proved. It was commended by the *Deputati* of 1573, 'for language, for doctrine, and as taking notice of many peculiarities of the age.' It was said by them, that '*Benvenuto da Imola* drew many things, and copied much from it.' The celebrated Leonardo Salviati praised it for its simple eloquence and correct language, and thought it a profitable addition to the Italian language.

No pains have been spared by the Italian *literati*, to increase its claim to attention. The copy which served for the present edition, was executed '*con somma pazienza*' by the late Signor Bartolomeo Follini, brother of the learned academician, now librarian of the *Magliabecchiana*. It was compared with the most scrupulous exactness by the Signor Bencini, Vice-librarian of the Laurentian academy. Some parts of the manuscript were nearly illegible;—these were supplied according to the judgment of the *literati*; some slight errors in names were corrected, and all grammatical faults were rectified. '*Nor do we doubt*,' says Signor Torri in conclusion, 'that we shall deserve the gratitude of all those who study the language, since they will here see what was, in the time of Dante, the science of those who called themselves learned in Italy.'

The publication of this commentary will no doubt give

rise to fresh discussion amongst the learned, especially at Florence, where the works of the ancient interpreters of Dante are so numerous; and where, by a comparison between this and the other primitive commentaries, it is probable that a new light may be thrown upon many doubtful passages. The wonderful diligence, learning, perseverance, and ingenuity displayed by the commentators both ancient and modern on the *Commedia*, in their search after the obscure allusions, the hidden meanings, the allegorical mysteries and the historical facts alluded to by the poet, must no doubt have had a favorable influence on the rapid progress of learning in Italy.

The poets contemporary with Dante have left but little worthy of notice. Whatever may be their intrinsic value, they move in a sphere too near to him, and are eclipsed by his brightness. We hear of Jacopone da Todi, who composed religious hymns, full of a mystic enthusiasm; of Cecco d'Ascoli, the author of *l'Acervo*, who was burnt alive at Florence as a sorcerer, at the age of seventy; of Cino da Pistoia, imitated in some degree by Petrarca himself; but until the fourteenth century, there is no name which can be mentioned even as secondary to that of Dante.

In tenderness, delicacy and beauty, Petrarca equalled, but never surpassed his great predecessor,—in sublimity he never even approached him. In comparing the two poets, each should be judged by his own peculiar style of excellence. 'The Air of Vacluse,' says a modern biographer of Petrarca, 'seems fanning us as we read, and the murmur of its fountains, the song of its birds, its laurel shades, and the sighs of the poet, steal pleasantly over the imagination.'

Dante is like a gallant ship, which has made its way through the world of waters, without moon, or stars, or compass,—surrounded by storms and darkness; a brief flash of lightning alone illuminating the shades of night. Petrarca is the light and beautiful bark, which the morning's dawn sees following in its track, under a blue sky and impelled by favoring gales. *His* true glory consisted in his enthusiasm for all that is great and beautiful in antiquity, a taste which he communicated not to Italy alone, but to Europe.

A crowd of illustrious names succeed in Italian literature, yet Dante remains—'the Master of the sapient throng.*' Thus

* The enthusiasm for the father of poetry which still exists amongst

poetry sprung at once from infancy to manhood ;—from the first rude dawn of invention, to its meridian height. Science advances by slow degrees, but never attains to maturity, and the modern *Savant* can smile in scorn at the natural philosophy of his ancestors. Art, on the contrary, has ever risen with a giant stride to perfection. That which depends on genius or feeling, very soon becomes stationary, or in process of time, degenerates. The fathers of poetry had the advantage of working on original materials, before fashion had moulded society on one uniform model.

In proportion as knowledge is more generally diffused, the imagination becomes less susceptible, and it would seem that as science advances art recedes. Homer in ancient, Dante in modern times, cannot be eclipsed by their illustrious successors ; on the contrary, the longer the vista of ages through which we behold them, the more we become impressed with a sense of their pre-eminence.

the learned in Italy, may be inferred from a simple but affecting circumstance, recorded in the memoirs of Silvio Pellico. When, in consequence of a rash effort of patriotism, he was doomed to linger for years in an unwholesome dungeon, his two sources of consolation were the *Bible* and *La Divina Commedia*.